

On Taiwan and Its Identity Crisis

This short planned trip can't start better. I arrive in 桃园机场 | Taoyuan airport this morning after I decided only last weekend to come to Taiwan for a bike ride – alone. It has been quite a while that I travelled solitarily. Travelling then turns into a kind of a quest, a search for the self within; and its recreational character is rather reduced – read more [here](#). I find an ATM at the airport and next to it a Taiwan telecom shop where I buy a five-day phone and data package for 300 NTD only. Connected to the Taiwanese web, I move forward to the left luggage counter to realize that there is no possibility to change my clothes there. My original plan to start my cycling tour directly from the airport, has reached a dead end here. So I sit down in some close by waiting area and book a room with a nearby airbnb host on my phone. One lunch and 45min later I am being picked up by 小蔡 alias Bill, who drives me in a filthy Toyota sedan to a private home about 10km North of the airport. Throughout the ride I am bombarded with questions, which make me arrive quite exhausted. My hosts turn out to be Bill's friend who rents out 16 rooms in total. Bill seems to be the manager and emergency driver, who charges me 300 NTD for the ride after we are connected on wechat. I love this speedy networking. No surprise that IT did pick up here of all places in the world.

My hosts are retired business executives; both fluent in English, she even like a native speaker. Pat takes me to dinner into 中集 | Zhongji downtown and tells me that he was VP for sales at HP and Lexmark before he retired at age 43 in 2013. His partner was VP for marketing at HTC. They both have a past of failed marriages and are almost cured workaholics who have settled into a quieter life style managing their B&B's and a hotel in Taipei. Pat has a 14-year-old daughter in Vancouver and a 5-year-old son in the US from his prior marriages. His partner has two almost grown up children on her own. Pat's third child, his two-year-old son Lele lives with them and his nanny. He had a liver tumor, which had been successfully removed last year. Life has changed, Pat tells me, he doesn't like to work anymore for other people; and with the increasing numbers of mainland tourist coming to Taiwan there is no easier way to make money as to open hotels. Pat also owns a boutique hotel in Taipei which is managed by his younger brother, and they can be sure of steady business: individual travelling visas for mainland citizens are limited to 4000 per day, but the number for tour groups seems to be unrestricted. It seems that Taiwan is on a straight path to turn into the Balears of Far East Asia, while the Philippines are probably about to become the region's Canaries.

I wish I could have come earlier. Already on the first day the sinologist within me feels that a proper understanding of China is only possible with some

understanding of Hong Kong and Taiwan. Hong Kong did always give me an impression of how China could be and how mainland Chinese 1st tier cities could look like in 20 years from now; but its Anglo-Saxon atmosphere in a *polis*-setting, geographically being set part from the continental landmass, is not quite comparable to the island Taiwan, which has its own countryside and even though small, it can be considered a proper country by all accounts.

The separation of China from Taiwan and vice versa in 1949 is one of these cases in history where a cultural unity breaks into two parts and social evolution can be observed as it works its way into two different directions. Its like putting two identical lizards on the Galapagos and Hawaii and watching them slowly evolving apart from each other due to the conditions of their habitats. China being now due to its size, economic and political impact probably the most studied country in the world can't be understood properly without understanding its relationship to Taiwan. Even though they are so different in size, it seems that they are like yin and yang, like day and night, like two sides of the same coin.

Its an interesting observation, not much understood in the West, that the cold war actually started 1945 in Taiwan with the US grabbing the last bit of KMT ruled territory to save it from the Soviet supported CCP. Throughout my cycling tour I come up with different analogies about the relationship between China and Taiwan. The most obvious is East and West Germany with the big difference though that China got due to size and capitalist-totalitarian regime economically the upper hand. 30 years ago one could have also tried to draw an analogy with North- and South Korea, but these times are economically speaking really gone. In terms of a society's collective development the analogy might still apply though – why else attach the East Germany or North Korea attribute to China if not for this reason? Yet another analogy crossed my mind, which is close to my own history: the relationship between Austria and Germany during the 19th and early 20th century. It is one of many similarities, but still many differences, periods of unification, but mostly separate historical trajectories, and lately an increased diffusion of both nations due to the integration of the EU with the supremacy of the large German speaking population.

If China is not considered a country, but a continent-civilization, then Taiwan is just a small shard of a broken vase. And truly, whether they admit it or not, many representatives of the Chinese elite do not only consider Taiwan, but also Japan, Korea, Mongolia and Vietnam as such shards which need to be fixed again into one three legged pot containing all under heaven; if not imperial entities proper, then at least they must by turned again into vassal dominions as they have been in alternating during Tang, Ming and Qing dynasties. Such an outlook scares some Taiwanese who have grown attached to their own collective identity, which is by all means different from the mainland Chinese one. Taiwan is a

strange hybrid between China before the communist take over and the Cultural Revolution, the US and Japan with a SEA feel to it reminding me quite a bit of the Philippines. But as opportunistic as Asian people are – in a very positive sense though, because Europeans have a tendency to overemphasize principles and morale – many Taiwanese have already converted like the island's most powerful business magnate and minority owner of [Foxconn](#), [Terry Guo](#), to mainland nationalism for the sake of commercial advantages, i.e. market access; they pragmatically bow to the might of the mother nation, because they know there is no getting away for a tiny island in such a strategic location. Like Hong Kong, Taiwan is a sandy rock which is gradually being crushed by mainland breakers, and which will be eventually swallowed by the infinite Chinese ocean.

Mr. Dai, our Shanghai company driver, spent his vacation 2013 in Taiwan. When he picks me up from the airport on my return from my island bike ride, he summarizes my observation in one simple sentence. 'I have been looking for you after your call at the domestic arrival, but I couldn't find you. I asked the people over there and so I ran over to the international arrivals.' I return a smile and tell him: 'Taiwan is just not a part of communist China.' He replies uncannily with a broad smile on this face pulling away my bicycle case: 'They just don't want yet, but sooner or later they will be a part of China.'

Despite this somewhat gloomy midterm outlook on Taiwan's assimilation to the mainstream-mainland entity, the easiest question to make a clear difference between China and Taiwan is to ask a Taiwanese whether he would have liked to grow up in China, if he could turn back the wheel of time to 1949 when his or her parents have left the communists and mainland behind. I am pretty sure that people like Patrick Dong, my host, who has thrived throughout his life, because he had all the opportunities Taiwan provided him throughout the last 30 years, would clearly say no.

That mainlanders are themselves not really sure if they should believe CCP propaganda was reflected in the reactions to my first wechat post after arrival in Taiwan May 2015: 'Finally I have made it to Taiwan. I originally should have come here to do my JD at NTU. Today I come to ride my bicycle. The difference with mainland is huge. If Beijing claims that Taipei is part of China, Berlin can also claim that Vienna is part of Germany. On the road, I feel its a blend of Vietnam, the US, Hong Kong, Japan and mainland.' Jing replies: 'China is a cultural concept. Taiwan does acknowledge that it is a part of China; it only doesn't accept the CCP.' Li Yun replies: 'I have been there in 2005; Taiwan is just a small Japan!'

China being rather a civilization than a nation was broadly discussed by sinologist Jacques Martin in [When China Rules the World](#). What Martin misses is

that culture and governance are overlapping, but not identical. In this sense, I believe that Taiwan is (still, but for how long) culturally the better product of Chinese civilization, if anything at all. Observing the daily routines of Taiwanese people during my second journey to *Ilha Formosa*, as the Portuguese called the island, confirms this assumption. At Taipei Songshan District Mingsheng Elementary School I witness for example that children spend Friday morning an hour cleaning the adjacent public park. Neatly dressed in orange road worker jackets they both diligently and playful wield broom and shovel under the supervision of their teachers. When children are acquainted with community service and environmental awareness at such a young age they surely turn into responsible adults, who don't drop their waste wherever they are.

Compared to the Chinese, it seems that the Taiwanese prefer community over society and their government builds a concept of nation by strengthening local communities. Despite all the problems Taiwan might face in these days, I believe that it can serve as an example to its mainland cousin. True strength is built from inside out, not from outside in. I do scratch Taiwan only on the surface, but I penetrated China profoundly over the last 16 years and I feel that I know the Taiwanese for they are broadly spoken what Chinese could be, if they were not dilapidated by endemic diseases like the cultural revolution and recently by excessive nationalism. When nationalism and capitalism substitute families and communities social conflict is the natural consequence.

With the lost Tiger nation status, the manufacturing industry moving to China, rising regional competing economies like Vietnam or Thailand, Taiwan is surely in a state of collective crisis. Well educated, bilingual and unemployed university graduates are being hired by mainland corporations, because they are already cheaper than their mainland counterparts. A minimum wage of TWD 22k, roughly CNY 4500 reveals that despite the acquired general wealth during the 4th quarter of the 20th century, individual income levels are far lower than in advanced Western nations and the rich-poor gap ever widening.

Taiwanese overemphasize education and force their offspring through a grueling curriculum, which kills the child within. It is therefore not surprising that it is the Taiwanese who are the superficially most childish society on this planet with Japanese [Hello Kitty](#) cartoon character as national mascot and brand ambassador for a [major airline](#). Most Taiwanese probably don't understand these dynamics themselves, but it is their education system which smothers in human development terminology the psychological expectations of toddlers and children. Hello Kitty is therefore a symbol for an adult populace which tries to make up for it's lost childhood. I perceive Hello Kitty similar like the clown in [Stephen King's It](#). The cartoon is a shuddering revelation of a society's psyche.

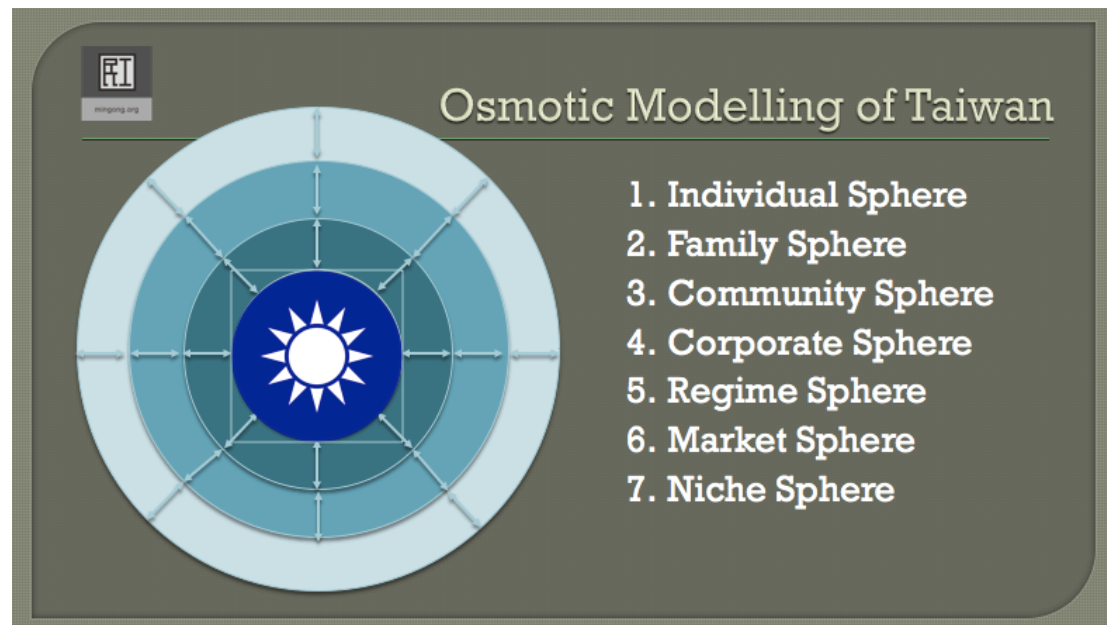
Things don't seem to brighten up. My friend Ing Tse who teaches currently architecture in Tainan tells me that graduate students are usually weaker than undergraduate classes, because all the bright minds leave the country for graduate education to some Anglo-Saxon ivory school. It seems as if Taiwan is in a dead end concerning its educational policy. Some Nobel laureate who became minister of education in the late 90ies reformed the education system which until then had served its purpose for an emerging economy in churning out engineers and scientist. Since then, Ing Tse summarizes, the system has changed for the worst, because it has adopted US characteristics of giving wealth easier access to higher education than diligence or competence. Students from economically disadvantaged families need to pass all examinations with high grades in order to make it into university, effectively depriving them of choice, interest and important periods for children to idle about.

If an education system has to fulfill only one purpose in a society, then it is to redistribute for the student generation the cards which have been dealt to their fathers and forefathers. Taiwan seems to fail in this regard and reform is necessary.

National economies like enterprises go through a life cycle. When they have managed to build their material infrastructures they must change their educational systems from an engineering and science focus back to a balance with humanities. Taiwan – like so many other industrialized nations – has also failed in this regard. The resulting crisis in a small island nation which has an extremely high urbanization rate of close to 80% is youth depression on an epidemic scale. Ing Tse tells me that the dean of the architectural school instructed her when joining the university early this year, that students are not anymore like during her own student days in the late 80ies and early 90ies. They are sensitive and vulnerable on the one hand, and highly belligerent and litigant on the other. Both the cases of students suing teachers for psychological abuse and the cases of students suffering from clinical depression are increasing. The reasons for this change are not known, Ing Tse continues, she herself has studied and worked before returning to her Taiwanese alma mater in Beijing, New York, Vienna and Guadalajara. Ten years in mainland China made her believe that man needs a harsh environment to be content.

I do only partially agree. Taiwan is in the difficult situation that both society and citizens are under a dual pressure, which is caused by different sociological layers. Since some time I perceive societies as organisms which are not so much different from a single cell, hence the term osmotic modelling. They are separated from other societies by a membrane which their governments erect and maintain; but such a membrane is isolating as well as permeable. Single biological cells make up entire biological organisms like the human being. Single

human beings form family and corporate systems which then again in their entirety make up a society. Shared civilizational heritage can function as an additional cell layer which includes several such national systems; regional and global systems like the market place can play a similar role and therefore sabotage established cell layers like the nation state.



Taiwan is, since China's economic rise within the global market place, exposed to an incredible political pressure, because the CCP regime deliberately blends the concept of the nation state with the Chinese civilization concept. China has ever since 1949 considered Taiwan a renegade province, but was not able to attach any political pressure to its claims. Taiwan grew under the protection of the US and due to the diligence of its people into one of four Tiger economies and justly established a collective identity which is similar to the self-understanding of *Wirtschaftswunder* West-Germany as opposed to communist East-Germany. With its rise to economic might, Beijing has gained leverage over Taipei; and this leverage is aggravated due to shared civilization and historical background. Thus, strangely enough China manages to exert pressure from without and from within: Being a national economy itself it pressures Taiwan from without; Taiwan's people being intrinsically linked with China due to their shared civilization brake away from their recently found nation identity and merge themselves out of understandable opportunism with the cultural identity of the larger cousin.

These dynamics are accelerated by a second sociological layer, which exerts psycho-social pressure from the niche sphere upon all other layers of society: industrialization. Technology is the uncontrollable variable in any sociological formula; and without doubt did the industrial revolution not only bestow upon humanity the blessings of more productivity and higher living standards, but it

also spelled the curses of urbanization and division of labor. 19th century sociologists like Marx, Weber and Durkheim already knew about the alienating force of industrialization. But it was only Durkheim who coined the term sociological functionalism by asking: what holds individuals together in social institutions?¹

If we would ask Durkheim to answer his question in regard to contemporary Taiwan, he would most likely be excited to find a textbook case for another term he coined to describe social disintegration: anomie; to be best understood as *insufficient normative regulation*. During periods of rapid social change, individuals sometimes experience alienation from group goals and values. They lose sight of their shared interests based on mutual dependence. In this condition, they are less constrained by group norms. Normative values become generalized, rather than personally embraced.

In the eyes of the grand old scholar of international relations, Henry Kissinger, the entire world probably suffers from anomie. He believes that the current international system and its smallest unit, the national state, is threatened by the rise of China, supranational organizations like the EU or ASEAN and religious contestants like fundamentalist Islam.² Mr. Kissinger, looking at the world from the regime perspective only, turns most likely a blind eye purposely to the impact of industrialization and above all the abuse of democratic systems. But without question, the Chinese civilization self understanding does sabotage the Westphalian order, in particular in the case of Taiwan.

I sometimes dream of a world where communities outperform societies; where inner self guidance wins over power structures. In such a world Taiwanese and Chinese would probably be more interested in their Pre-Neolithic history and their deep ancestry. They would not bother whether they are friend or foe in cross strait relations. They would try to listen to their artistic and spiritual desires which they have inherited from their forefathers, but have lost due to the obnoxious noise of industrialization and nation building. Some would find out that they are related to the Ainu, Japanese aboriginals who settled Taiwan coming from the North. Others would be surprised to be related to Austronesian tribes coming from the South and spreading as far as New Zealand and Hawaii.

A Swiss Jesuit who then had already lived more than 30 years with Taiwanese aboriginal communities was the first who told me some 15 years ago, when I was still teaching in Heilongjiang Province, about the miraculous Pre-Neolithic

¹ <http://www.brooklyn soc.org/courses/43.1/durkheim.html>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/oct/01/world-order-by-henry-kissinger-review-account>

settlement of Taiwan. His tales about stunning mountain landscapes and an abundance of ethnic groups stuck with me till this day. The small [Shung Ye Museum](#) of Formosan Aborigines was therefore a must visit during my last visit to Taiwan. It confirmed the existence of 16 different ethnic groups which lived most likely from 8000 BC until the 16th century without interference from the outside world, i.e. from mainland China. An elderly museum scholar told me that the Formosan aboriginals are part of the 400 Million strong Austronesian race and distinctly different from the Chinese. Upon joint reflection on one of the museum's animation showing that Taiwan was part of the continent during the last ice age, probably similar like Japan and many other now sea locked islands, she concedes that science has probably not yet found final answers to the factual migration routes of early human populations. It could therefore well be that Austronesians have separated from continental East Asians only during the last ice age. The prejudice of Han Taiwanese who have settled Taiwan since the 17th century would then be reduced to a cultural prejudice; genetically the two ethnic families are probably closer than they think and the aboriginal forager life style might actually turn into a much desired exit from the Confucian work ethic industrialization dead end.

Taiwan's exposed location has made it ever since into the Asian seafaring and migrating hub par excellence. Not only man, but also birds migrate along the continental coast and in midst of oceanic currents; they take an easy drift from one destination to the next and have to make a stop over on the welcoming island. Taiwan's history is therefore one of encounter and connection. Formosan aboriginals, Portuguese, Dutch, Qing Chinese, Japanese, bastard pirates and Americans all ventured into the region and left their traces upon the archipelago. The Dutch [Fort Provincia](#) tells a similar story of seafaring enterprise like the [Zheng Chengong Temple](#) in Tainan. Zheng Chengong aka Koxinga was a 17th century pirate of Japanese-Chinese origin who drove the Dutch from Taiwan and established himself there as the Emperor of Tungning. His loyalty to the Ming expelled him from Qing ruled China; his formidable piracy career led him from the original Zheng family base in Fujian's Fuzhou North to the Yangtze river delta and as far South as to Spanish occupied Philippines. How pathetic is our 21st century travelling compared to him?

After all, I believe that the region needs a new sense for community and integration, which must gain ground against exclusion and isolation. It is therefore quite aptly to close this essay on Taiwan with the words of Jay Lin, who organized last week's [Taiwan International Queer Film Festival](#). His facebook summary of an intense week of socializing and pushing LGBT rights read like this: *'With the theme "Let's Connect," I tried my upmost to make new connections: connections that will inspire new collaborations, new possibilities and new aspirations. It's crazy work but it's also all worth it. To me, the glass is never half*

full nor half empty. It is always full because that's the way I see and the way I want it to be. Thanks for all the support from friends near and close as I will keep every friendship close to my heart. Good start of the week to all as we close this memorable chapter and keep moving and loving forward.' If only more people were able to transcend conformist boundaries and could see the world like him.

Where to Stay

Anywhere. Taiwanese are very hospitable and accommodation is with the exception of downtown Taipei a bargain in both price and value compared to mainland China. Airbnb is compared to mainland widely used.

How to Get There

The return air fare from Shanghai (PVG) to Taoyuan (TPE) starts usually at about CNY 1500. Be sure to choose the closest airport to your island destination. Kaohsiung airport (KHH) is usually where you want to go when travelling to any place in Southern Taiwan like Tainan or Orchid Island.

Take either a cab or travel environmentally friendly with the airport shuttle bus from [Jingan Aviation Building | 静安寺航站楼](#) to Pudong Airport | 浦东机场. Buses run from 5:30 to 21:30 every 15-30' and cost only CNY 22. After a 45-60' ride make sure to get off at the right terminal; T2 is usually your destination for international flights. More information about airport bus lines is available on the [Airport website](#).

Further Travel information

<https://hikingtaiwan.wordpress.com/>
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